Fateful Concepts: Hacking Contests

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http://rpg.drivethrustuff.com/product/143487/Fateful-Concepts-Hacking-Contests
You can find examples of the rules in this document there, as well as an essay on understanding the ebb and flow of contests.

Timed Contests

Since contests are races against various participants, it's easy to add in a timed element, where a contest ends poorly for everyone if no one has won before time's up. One example of a timed contest is rival magicians trying to harness the power of a storm before it ends. Having multiple hackers trying to retrieve sensitive data on a server before the admin shuts it down is another example. Two con artists working against the same mark is a simple contest that could become a timed one if they're trying to succeed before police detectives inform the mark of their true natures.

It's simple to model this by having an upper limit on a contest's number of exchanges. That means there are some things to consider in the setup and another rule in the handling of exchanges.

Setting Up a Timed Contest

Along with the standard considerations you need to make for contests, you need to make a few other decisions in the setup. First, know what the timed element represents and know *how and why* it's a problem for the participants. It's not enough to know what the characters are racing against. The storm dissipating is a natural phenomenon, and it makes more sense if the exchanges are of significant time, such as an hour per. The hackers are racing against the admin because the admin knows there's an intrusion but isn't just pulling the plug on the connection because she's trying to trace them. The detectives could call the mark at any point on his cell phone, so the timed element represents them piecing together clues rather than physically moving to intercept the mark.

Next, know what happens if time runs out. This should be obvious; if it's not, your timed element has some problems. It could be as simple as pure opportunity lost, such as neither magician gaining the storm's power. Or it could be a consequence for even participating, as with our hackers being traced by the admin or the mark becoming aware of the con. The consequence could affect someone else rather than the participants.

Finally, ask yourself if the characters are aware of the timed element; if so, do they know how long they have? In our examples above, the magicians should be aware that the storm won't last forever, but they don't know how long they have. Our hackers are able to see the trace attempts on them, so know if they're going to be caught. The con artists aren't at all aware of the detectives potentially informing the mark.

Playing a Timed Contest

A timed contest plays out as a regular contest, with participants declaring actions, rolling dice, and handling successes as normal. The only change is marking off time on every exchange after the exchange is resolved and the contest isn't finished. An easy way to track this is to mark a tick for time at the end of each exchange, treating it almost as if it's a participant.

If no one has won the contest on the final exchange, then time effectively wins and the participants lose. The order is important: if someone wins the contest on what would be the last exchange, then time doesn't win.

That's all. Timed contests are easy to run; the trick is more in the setup than in the execution.

Hacking Further

The three considerations above are universal for timed contests, but there are some further ways of hacking contests, such as aborting contests, partial consequences from time, time changing the contest rather than ending it, and time having different meaning to different participants.

Aborting a Timed Contest: Some timed contests present known consequences that seem avoidable if the contest is aborted, such as our hackers knowing they're being traced. If participants know that there's a timed element and a consequence for running out that they could evade by aborting, declare if that's an option when starting the contest. If so, characters must decide to at the start of an exchange rather than act in the contest; once the dice are rolled, you're locked into that exchange. You'll need to have an idea of

what happens should someone abort, whether that's simple opportunity lost and time wasted or if there's some other consequence, as well as what the characters' know about this potential consequence.

In the case of our hackers, they know that they could be traced and are able to see the trace's progress, so it's reasonable to say that they can abort. But there's still a consequence—aborting is a sign of weakness and shame that will come back to haunt them as they try to get work from fixers, and they know of this risk in aborting.

Partial Consequences from Time: This basic system assumes that the consequences from time are all-or-nothing, but that doesn't have to be the case. You could have smaller, delayed, or different consequences based on how much time the participants took to end the contest. It's important to not have partial consequences happen before the minimum number of exchanges that can end the contest, otherwise you're punishing characters for participating in a dramatic conflict. (Remember not to mark time on the exchange where a character wins.)

For our magicians fighting for the power of the storm, their efforts could be causing the storm to grow chaotic and cause severe damage to their city. Each exchange beyond the second causes more and more calamity, which the GM might have take the form of aspects that could be compelled and invoked against the magicians.

Time Changing the Contest Instead of Ending It: This system has time running out end the contest, but that also doesn't have to be the case. Time running out could instead radically change the contest's nature or otherwise cause a major event to happen in the middle of it. This option works only if the progress the characters' have made still matters after the event, and if they can continue to make progress. You could also have multiple layers of timed triggers—something happening after three exchanges, another after the fourth, and so on.

Should the con artists not succeed before the mark is informed, the GM could have the mark play along with the con—the mark doesn't know the identity of those trying to con him, but he has the aspect *Warned* with a free invocation, and perhaps gaining another free invocation with each subsequent exchange.

Time Having Different Meaning to Participants: You don't need time to have the same impact on every involved character. Time winning could be life-and-death to one character, a social blow to a third, and a mere inconvenience to another. As long as time running out has some significant impact on at least one character, it will have teeth in the story, because that character will fight to win against time just as the others will fight to win against them.

One of our hackers could be working from a location where tracing wouldn't matter, such as a country where the hacker wouldn't be arrested or where the company that owns the server can't send a hit squad to the hacker. The other hacker is working from a wireless junction in the same city as the server, so is very much in potential danger. That said, the first hacker would still fail once time runs out, because once the trace is complete the admin will shut the server down.

Hostile Invocations

Whenever you invoke another player character's aspects against them—notably but not only consequences—that's a **hostile invocation**, and that character's player gets the fate point. This rule is an important part of Fate (*Fate Core System* page 69), because it's a way to give a player fate points. But this doesn't just count for character aspects! If there's an aspect effectively attached to or controlled by a PC, like some aspect-worthy gear they're holding or an advantage they created, and it's invoked against that character, that's a hostile invocation.

If that aspect isn't invoked directly against the character, but the action works against that character's interests (which is generally the only reason you could invoke someone else's aspect), that player still gets the fate point. This rule is key to remember when one player hostilely invokes another's aspect.

Fate points from hostile invocations can't be spent on the situation where they're gained. They're available starting on the next scene. (Otherwise, you could just spend back and forth and draw a contest out by invoking and counter-invoking each other.)

Oh, and usually everyone can invoke *On Fire* even if one character deliberately created it as an advantage, because no one actually *controls* that aspect. (Unless you're talking about magic or something else that grants control, hence "usually.")

Chases as Contests

This system works for any opposed contest that involves one side catching up to another, and the side with the initial advantage having a goal they're actively trying to accomplish that's not just enduring, such as racing to the border before the fascist police catch you, securing a network currently being hacked, or closing a portal being opened to an alternate dimension before the ghosts reach the opening and escape—provided they feel like chases.

Setting Up a Chase

As with any other contest, set the scene and answer the questions. Figure out who the chasers and chased are.

The chased starts with three victories, and needs six to escape. The chasers start with no victories, and needs to match (not beat) the number of victories the chased have to catch them. Basically, each side starts by needing three victories. If the chasers win in the first exchange, it's that much harder for the chased to escape, and vice versa.

Because the chased party just needs three victories, that means they'll get to safety somewhere when they succeed even if the chasers are one victory behind. Before you begin the chase, figure out what that end goal is for both parties: what the chasers are trying to get to, and what sort of ways you could imagine losing the chase.

Playing a Chase

At the start of each exchange, the GM describes the scene, including what's new or different from the last. Don't skip this! Without keeping the scene's description flowing, it's easy to get caught up in rote narration while you're trying to beat the other side. After that, the chased describes their action, the chaser follows suit, and then everyone rolls. Whoever wins describes what that moment of victory looks like, though the player who lost could instead explain what gets in the way if the winner struggles with the narrative. Ties cause a dramatic change in the situation, as usual.

Head Starts & Other Edges

Having a head start or other advantage should be handled as boosts for the side with that edge. Don't start either side with more or fewer victories, as even one victory either way will cause the contest to become lopsided and play out quite unevenly.

Winning

If the chaser scores enough victories to catch up with the chased, that contest is over, though it doesn't mean the chased is subdued or helpless—that's its own action beat! The important thing is that the chase can't just start again right away. The chased has to deal with the consequences. Likewise, if the chased gets enough victories to escape, the chase is over and the chaser has to deal with losing.

Involving Time

You could include an element of time, where if the chased fails then they haven't escaped yet—like if the chasers' backup arrives, the border guards set up barricades, etc. This could give a bit of an edge to the chasers, where tying could be a sort of victory because it denies those being chased a victory they need before running out of time. This option isn't suitable for every chase contest, though.

Victory Track Variant

This system is designed to be fairly quick, which is why the chased has to get a fixed number of victories regardless of how many the chaser has. With that, the contest will end in a short number of exchanges. But this system also implies that the chased party has a specific goal to reach; another way to handle chases with contests that doesn't imply some fixed end goal is to have a variable track between the

chased and chaser (like a long-running freeway chase where the chased party is purely trying to outrun pursuers).

Both sides start at zero victories, just as with a normal contest, and need to get three victories more than the other side in order to succeed.

Since this could end up in a long string of back-and-forth exchanges that end up being a zero-sum situation, add another variable to the chase—such as adding a time element or having ties introduce dangers that turn the chase into a contest under fire.

Contests Under Fire

In adventures, the protagonists often encounter threats that can harm them but can't be harmed in return. Some of these are environmental conflicts, like "escape from the erupting volcano." Others encounters revolve around overcoming overwhelming force, like "repair the anti-aircraft guns while being bombed from the skies" or "run from Cthulhu!" And still others involve trying to achieve something while being attacked, such as "complete the ritual to open the Gates of Purgatory before the demons kill me." You can handle these situations by blending contests and conflicts together into **contests under fire**.

Contests under fire work by having one (or more) side work toward achieving a goal by scoring victories before being taken out by one (or more) other side. It uses actions and exchanges from the conflict system, rather than rolling together for each exchange in contests.

Setting up a Contest Under Fire

Start by setting the scene as you would with a conflict: describe the environment, create situation aspects and zones as needed, then establish who's participating and what side they're on. Finally, outline what each side is trying to achieve—notably the side trying to achieve something beyond "stop those guys" or "kill those guys."

Once you have that, the last thing you need is to know how many victories something takes. This involves asking two questions:

How many participants are there on the contest side that can actually engage in the contest? If your contest is something like "repair the anti-aircraft guns," and only two of the four characters are mechanics, then you only have two participants. Even if you can justify other characters helping indirectly, only count those who can reasonably attempt and intend to do the relevant contest actions.

Can each participant work toward a victory on their own, or do they have to work together in a single action? If the contest requires a continual sustained effort, like chanting to "open the Gates of Purgatory," then it's likely that they're doing a single action each exchange to achieve victories, just as with normal contests. On the other hand, a large anti-aircraft gun might benefit from two mechanics operating on different parts simultaneously, meaning that they're each capable of achieving victories together.

If there's only one action per exchange that can push for victories, either because there's only one contest-worthy participant or because the actions are effectively joined, then start with the normal number of three victories before adjusting. If multiple actions in a given exchange can push for victories, start by multiplying the number of independent participants by three before adjusting.

When it comes to adjusting, the base number of victories means that at least two rounds of conflict happens before success is possible. If the conflict is meant to be drawn out, add to the number of victories, and then make sure that there are interesting things to do so that those players who are just acting to achieve a goal aren't bored.

Note: There can be conflict-oriented characters that can help on the contest side, like soldiers giving covering fire so that the mechanics can work. Or someone who can't directly participate in the contest might be able to justify using teamwork to help someone who can, like using Physique to haul heavy equipment around for the mechanics. Those characters have to choose between giving aid in the contest and acting in the conflict, which is described in the next section.

Playing Out a Contest Under Fire

Each exchange in a contest under fire has two phases: the conflict and the contest.

For the conflict phase, everyone—including those who are pushing on the contest—determines their initiative using whatever method your Fate build normally does for conflicts. Then each participant on their turn either does something in the conflict or states that they're going to act during the contest

phase. If you decide to act in the conflict, resolve your action before the next person decides what they want to do.

Those doing something in the conflict get to make their action as normal. Those working on the contest don't roll their action right away; if they aren't taken out or don't concede in the exchange, they roll for their action in the contest phase. This also means that someone working on the contest could decide to instead engage in the conflict for that exchange, like one of the two mechanics above switching to shooting at encroaching soldiers while her buddy continues the repairs. That said, once you've stated that your action is to work on the contest, you can't change your mind until the beginning of the next exchange—in the scene's story, you're putting your effort into the contest.

In the contest phase, everyone in the contest rolls their overcome action, either collectively (as in a normal contest) or individually as based on the situation. Since this is a one-sided contest, the GM sets the difficulty of the roll just as she would for an appropriate overcome action. Often, the difficulty isn't going to be especially high; don't go higher than Fair (+2) unless it would be inherently challenging even without being shot at or hunted by demons.

For a collective roll, if anyone succeeds, then a victory is scored. Two victories happen on a success with style. On a tie, they generate a boost usable in the next contest phase. Since there's already something chaotic happening and there's risk on the line, the contest rule regarding something dramatic happening on a tie isn't needed. Naturally, no victories are achieved on a failure; that doesn't mean the entire contest fails, just no progress is made (but remember success at a cost is still an option).

If no one acts in the contest phase, and the nature of the contest means that it fails if no one puts effort into it on an exchange, then the contest fails. The ritual to open the Gates of Purgatory could need uninterrupted chanting, for instance. On the other hand, if the two mechanics stop fixing the AA gun for a moment to fight off an enemy that just stormed up to them, the gun doesn't magically un-fix itself so the mechanics can continue next round.

GMs: You might use this an opportunity to vary the difficulty based on what's happening in the story. Is the barrier between worlds getting weaker due to another's actions, making the Gate to Purgatory easier to open? That puts pressure on the conflict side. On the other hand, if it's getting harder to open, that puts pressure on the contest side.

Ending a Contest Under Fire

A contest under fire ends when the number of victories needed are achieved, or when everyone who can participate in the contest concedes or is taken out (meaning the contest failed). At that point, one of three things happens:

If the contest causes the conflict to end, the conflict ends. Escaping through the Gates of Purgatory would cause that… if it shuts behind you. Fixing a bomb that you're sacrificing yourself to destroy a monstrous horde also effectively ends a conflict.

If the contest doesn't cause the conflict to end, then the conflict continues. Repairing an anti-aircraft gun doesn't stop soldiers on the ground from shooting at you, for example. But at least your mechanics can pick up their rifles and fire back!

If the contest fails, then the conflict continues if there are others on that side engaging in conflict, or it's over if the entire side is down.

Interference

There are a couple different ways to interfere with a contest.

Indirect Interference: Aspects can be invoked to raise the difficulty. Notably, consequences sustained in the exchange probably have their free invocation spend to this end.

Opposing Action: If another side is able to directly interfere, like a rival warlock working to banish your spell, then they roll as the opposition instead of a set difficulty. Ties still generate a boost for the contestants.

Denial: If someone is genuinely able to stop you from acting in the contest phase, such as by tackling you, then that contest phase has to go on without you. This can prove ruinous if the contest requires

constant attention. That said, if you're able to recover on the next exchange, you can go back to acting in the contest.

Two-Sided Contests

You might have a full contest happening at the same time as a conflict, like two sides rushing to get to the same parked SUV while the lava-men are chasing you down. In that case, treat the contest phase with the full contest rules, awarding victories to the side with the highest roll as normal. If a tie happens, then something dramatic occurs within the contest portion of the scene.

This modification could be used for a three-sided contest under fire—two for the contest, and another attacking both of those sides—or it could be used for a two-sided contest where the conflict agents *also* have people engaging in the contest.

Firing on More than Just Contests

The contest part of contests under fire is asymmetrical: the opposition isn't racing to achieve the same goal as much as it's trying to eliminate you before you succeed at a goal. This makes one-sided contests similar to challenges (*Fate Core System* page 147). The main difference is that the rules around victories and the sense of sustained action inherent to contests (rather than the discrete beats of a challenge) works for the average contest under fire situation.

It's simple to replace the contest part with a challenge, if the goal of the non-conflict side isn't a sustained effort but a series of different tasks. Just replace needing victories with independent actions, and play on! Likewise, you can also use other contest models (from this book or elsewhere) in contests under fire.

Contests with Multiple Objectives

One way to make a contest scene feel more climactic is to put varied stakes on the table, each of which need individual efforts to achieve. Imagine a scene where:

- Nancy the Necromancer finally has the Gem of Forgotten Warriors, and is using it to raise an army of undead.
- You and two friends have arrived to put a stop to evil using ethereal forces of your own.
- She's kidnapped your son, Jamal, to use him as a distraction—the moment she sees that you've arrived, the cage of bones he's in begins to crush him.
- The spell that Nancy's weaving could be used for the forces of good, something you've realized earlier in the adventure. But the only time to learn it is right now, while she's doing it.

Here's a scene with three things that the heroes want to do. One is straightforward, the second has a time element, and the third stops being possible once the first one is defeated (though maybe not if it succeeds).

Objectives

Objectives are significant things that the participants are pushing for in the contest. Instead of characters scoring victories for themselves in general, they score victories on various objectives. Outline what objectives are in play, both what characters want going in and what they discover at the start of the scene, then rank how many victories they need to achieve them. (Some GMs might be sneaky about how many victories are needed on some or all objectives, others will be entirely open. Both modes are great for play.)

When outlining each objective, discuss who can work on it, what form it takes—including how many victories it requires—and know what impact it will have on the scene.

Forms of Objectives: Some objectives will be opposed, like a demon trapped in a warded circle might try to free its bonds while a wizard is trying to banish it to its home plane. Some could take the form of a chase, like a spy running to a safe house while police are in pursuit. Others could have explicit time elements. And still others could have passive opposition.

In the example above, the ritual is a regular contest. It could easily be a chase, but chases give significant advantage to the side being chased (since they only need three victories, and the chasers need as many as the chased have), so the GM decides that it's a bit unfair with everything else she's going to include. Saving Jamal is a timed contest with a passive opposition of Fair (+2). Learning the ritual is a short contest, just two victories needed, with a passive opposition of Good (+3).

Who Can Push for an Objective: An objective could be exclusive to certain characters, exclusive to a side, or open to all. In the example, the necromancer's ritual is entirely open—she wants to complete it and the heroes are all capable of interfering with it. The kidnapped son contest is exclusive to the heroes' side, because the cage is its own opposition and the GM isn't going to have the necromancer put effort into maintaining it. And only the one magus PC can attempt to learn the spell.

Impact of Achieving Objectives on the Situation: Some objectives will end the scene, others won't end the scene but close off possibilities, and still others after being achieved don't affect the immediate situation at all. In this example, the contest of saving Jamal has its own time element. Ending the ritual also ends the contest for learning the spell behind it. And it's possible that if the ritual ends before the contest to save Jamal is over, Nancy might turn her full attention to the boy as revenge.

Adding New Objectives Mid-Contest: As an advanced technique, you can introduce new objectives that happen because of some trigger event. This is a bit difficult because you have to judge how much you're stretching the PC's resources in terms of action and of fate points, but done well it creates a sense of escalation. For example, maybe after hacking into a cyberpunk CEO's office computer, the very act of copying files to your drive triggers a bomb under the desk to start counting down. (As a personal note, I don't recommend this form of digital rights management.)

Playing Out Exchanges

Everyone describes what they're doing on each exchange, including which objective their action focuses on. Then everyone rolls, and each objective gets resolved at the same time. The simultaneous timing is key to remember: if one objective's resolution ends or significantly changes the scene, that happens after all the rolls are resolved.

Teamwork: More than one character can work together for the same objective simultaneously. If they are capable of working together, then use the normal teamwork rules. If multiple characters are working toward the same end but aren't able to work cooperatively, they act and roll separately.

Regardless of how the teamwork manifests, two victories maximum can be gained per objective, no matter how many people are involved or if how many rolls result in success with style. This means that a large group can't just shut out a contest outright. The GM might alter or remove this restriction for large groups and long victory tracks.

Ties: Ties may or may not cause an upheaval or intense change of situation, since a tie on just one contest doesn't necessarily affect others. Ties against passive opposition never cause a situation change; instead, that character gains a boost usable for that contest.

Success with Style and Multiple Objectives: If you succeed with style and your action would apply to another objective, the second victory you generate can score for the second objective rather than for the objective you initially declared. You can only do this if your roll beats the opposition on that second objective, and if it makes sense that your action has that secondary benefit—this wouldn't work for someone else's personal objective or an objective that requires concentrated focus to tackle.

Handling Objectives with Passive Opposition

Some objectives may be one-sided, providing passive opposition in the form of a difficulty rather than another character's direct effort. There are some different ways for objectives with passive opposition to play out: it's an objective that will linger, or it's one that continues to push pressure on the situation. Set the difficulty of the contest rolls as you would for an appropriate overcome action.

Lingering objectives are simple: if no one beats the objective that exchange, then it continues to exist and be a problem. These are also trivial by themselves, so some other pressure needs to be in play for lingering objectives to be interesting.

Pressure objectives always scores a victory if no one challenges it on a given exchange, and it scores a victory if no one beats or ties its difficulty. In any case, it can't succeed with style no matter what players roll against it; since these objectives can't succeed with style, they should require fewer victories for their negative outcomes (though a GM might decide certain pressure objectives scores two victories instead if not challenged on a given exchange).

Using Pseudo-Skills Instead of Difficulties

Rather than use difficulties when handling any passive contest, challenge, or other situations in Fate, you could add some unpredictability to the situation by giving a passive situation a **pseudo-skill**. Instead of assigning a rating, you make up an appropriate skill-like construction and roll it when that opposition is called for. If you use this, the obstacle or situation can invoke aspects and use the GM's fate points just as NPCs can—invocations are about turns of fate against the acting character in these cases.